



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

Case Analysis | 4 October 2022

“Women, Life, Freedom” Protesting the Islamic Republic

Mehran Kamrava

The Iranian Studies Unit

“Women, Life, Freedom” Protesting the Islamic Republic

Series: **Case Analysis**

4 October 2022

Mehran Kamrava

The Iranian Studies Unit

Mehran Kamrava

Mehran Kamrava heads the Iranian Studies Unit at the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies and is Professor of Government at Georgetown University Qatar.

Copyright © 2022 Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies. All Rights Reserved.

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies is an independent research institute and think tank for the study of history and social sciences, with particular emphasis on the applied social sciences.

The Center’s paramount concern is the advancement of Arab societies and states, their cooperation with one another and issues concerning the Arab nation in general. To that end, it seeks to examine and diagnose the situation in the Arab world - states and communities- to analyze social, economic and cultural policies and to provide political analysis, from an Arab perspective.

The Center publishes in both Arabic and English in order to make its work accessible to both Arab and non-Arab researchers.

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

Al-Tarfa Street, Wadi Al Banat

Al-Dayaen, Qatar

PO Box 10277, Doha

+974 4035 4111

www.dohainstitute.org



The killing in Iran of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old woman, at the hands of the so-called Morality Police (*Gasht-e Ershad*), has engulfed the country in nationwide protests since 16 September 2022. Amini, whose alleged crime was poor hijab, soon emerged as a symbol of women’s second-class status in Iran and a rallying cry for men and women of all ages to express outrage against the Islamic Republic’s arbitrary, and often draconian social policies. Since the 1978 - 79 revolution, women have been the main targets of the Islamic Republic’s austere social policies and forced to accept Khomeini’s, and later Khamenei’s, highly conservative and traditionalist versions of Islam. With varying degrees of intensity in its forty-three year history, the state has frequently sought to drag the population into heaven, even when kicking and screaming in resistance. The September-October 2022 protests are but the latest manifestation of an ideological state trying to enforce its ideology onto a restive and noncompliant population through its security forces.

The Islamic Republic is, of course, no stranger to protests, and the latest eruption is another chapter in a long repertoire of a society erupting intermittently against a state that is increasingly bereft of legitimacy. In recent years, the country has been racked by repeated episodes of violent, nationwide mass protests. Many of these past protests have been ignited by a sudden rise in the prices of basic goods, or lack of drinking water and other basic government services in the more deprived areas of the country and have generally lasted from one to two weeks. Each time, the protests have been brutally suppressed by the security forces, leading to mass arrests and hundreds of casualties.

The latest events stand out from earlier protests for several notable reasons. To begin with, the protests started not out of economic discontent, though deteriorating economic conditions certainly account for heightened dissatisfaction with the state, but over the issue of forced hijab. For the Islamic Republic, hijab is one of the most visible symbols of state ideology, with one half of the population signalling its compliance of the state’s dictate by observing it in public. The fact that the protestors are shouting slogans objecting to compulsory hijab, with women openly defying the state by appearing in public with their heads uncovered, and some even burning their headscarves in the streets, represents a direct challenge to the state ideology. This blatant ideological confrontation with the state in such large numbers is unprecedented for Iranians. This exceptional ideological challenge accounts for the severity of the Security Forces response and their wanton repression of people protesting in the streets.

Another important feature specific to the latest protests is the leading role played by women. From the inception of the Islamic Republic, the state’s clerical leaders have made women a target for second-class treatment. Today, despite the fact that women make up a disproportionately higher percentage of university students and graduates, Iran has one of the lowest rates of female participation in the formal workforce in the Middle East. State television programs glorify the virtues of motherhood and women’s work at home, while the country is simultaneously experiencing increasing rates of divorce and co-habitation without formal marriage. As if the clerics are afraid of women, the state keeps finding excuses to block women’s social mobility, economic empowerment, and even leisurely activities, including banning women from sports stadiums. The protestors’ slogan of “Women, Life,



Freedom” (*Zan, Zendegi, Azadi*) emerged in a context of the state making life for women increasingly more difficult by taking away one freedom after another.

Another unprecedented characteristic is the intensity and length of the protests. In the past, the protests often reached a crescendo on the second or third day, were then confronted by the security forces for about a week, and would die down by about the end of the second week. This time, however, into their third week as of this writing, the protests have slowed down, but continue to erupt on occasion in Tehran and in other cities. Significantly, while on previous occasions the protests usually started in smaller towns and then spread to bigger cities, this time they started in Tehran and spread to the rest of the country.

It is unknown, of course, is how long the protests will last and what their eventual consequences will be. Also unknown is the status of Khamenei, rumoured to be in ill health since the protests began. There are no clear answers to these questions at this point, and the trajectory of the protests remains undetermined. We know from the experience of the Arab Spring that the key to the political survival of incumbent dictators lies in the armed forces. In Iran, so long as the Security Forces remain loyal to the state and its ideology, there is no reason to suspect that the state is in serious trouble. Mir-Hossein Mousavi, former prime minister, and presidential candidate under house-arrest since the 2009 Green Movement, recently called on the Security Forces to join hands with the demonstrators. So far, however, there are no visible signs of elite defections or the abandonment of the clerical state by any branches of the country’s multiple armed forces.

Some tentative conclusions are, nevertheless, inescapable. Iran’s once-hybrid authoritarian system now no longer exhibits any hybridity; it is now a simple authoritarian state, reliant on the praetorian force of the Revolutionary Guards and other security services. President Ebrahim Raisi, who came into office promising to fix the economy, now finds himself even more reliant on the Revolutionary Guards to run the country. Whatever ideological legitimacy the state had, especially among the urban middle classes, is quickly evaporating.

Ultimately more important may be the longer-term social consequences of the latest uprisings. There have been scattered individual protests against mandatory hijab in the past. But now Iranian women have lashed out in droves against the social conservatism and myopia of the ruling clerical classes. Compulsory hijab, the most visible ideological symbol of the Islamic Republic, has now been challenged in a most obvious and celebrated manner. Even if the protests are effectively suppressed, and women go back to obediently donning their mandatory headscarves and chadors in public, Iranian women have demonstrated their empowerment and defiance in a manner that men have seldom dared to. The gap between the Iranian state and Iranian society is now wider than ever, with women leading the charge to separate a society yearning for freedom from a state that demands compliance and conformity.